TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Jesus and the Question of Hygiene* Matthew 15:10-28

Faith and fulfillment, this is what Matthew seems to want his readers to understand, but also to explore. Thus, Matthew’s Gospel recognizes Jesus as God’s mediator through whom God makes salvation and justice happen. Matthew also recognizes that Jesus is of Israel, and represents a fulfillment of an ancient promise given to the prophet Isaiah for Israel: *“I chose you to bring justice, and am here at your side. I selected you and sent you to bring light and my promise of hope to the nations”* [Isaiah 42:6 Common English Version].

Scholarly consensus holds that Matthew’s community “is predominantly Jewish, that is, it is made up of those who have been formed within the rich tradition of Israelite thought forms and practices that have shaped their understanding of God and “God’s will” for God’s people.” Now that God has given *“all authority in heaven and on earth”* to a resurrected Jesus [28:18] those traditions have come under scrutiny. With Jesus, there is always a palpable sense of change being “in the air,” and change is never an easy thing for human beings.

Jesus, however, is all about change. We see this in the way in which he travels the countryside and ministers. So, for the past couple of Sundays, we have made our way through this part of the Gospel according to Matthew, we have traveled with Jesus and the disciples as he has stopped and ministered to many people. Each time, he changed the lives of all the people around him.

So, we see him as he stops on his way to a quiet place to pray because he had seen the need of the people who had been gathering to listen to him. Despite his own fatigue, despite the doubt of the disciples, he did not feed only five thousand people. Because Matthew says that there were women and children *besides* five thousand men, we can comfortably multiply five thousand by at least three.

Last week, we heard of the way in which he stopped his prayer time sometime during the night, because he knew the disciples were in trouble in the boat he had put them into.

Walking across the waves to them, in the middle of a storm, Jesus plucked Paul out of the water as he began to sink, and he immediately brought calm to the water and to the disciples. More than calm, Jesus brought his disciples to a deeper sense of faith and understanding of who he was—who he *is* even today.

In both of those stories, Jesus’ whole being and focus was toward bringing wholeness of body and soul to the people he encountered—the hungry multitude, and the frightened disciples.

In both those stories, it is important to note that the people to whom he ministered were Israelites, like himself. All of the people he has been going out of his way to feed and rescue have been the people who have followed the traditions and the Law of God as it was given to Moses on Sinai. These people are often called “the chosen” because God led them out of slavery in Egypt so that they might become *the* nation in the world that worships God with integrity and truth. This has been their chief identity and their source of strength and pride as a people.

This is the people Jesus himself was born into, and the people he has sought out. Indeed, as we heard in the second story this morning, Jesus’ understands his mission as being first and foremost a mission to the Israelites. As “the chosen” they are to be his witnesses in the world.

However, in the two stories just read for us, something new and different is going on—something wondrous and blessed.

After the incident of walking on water and calming a storm, Jesus’ boat lands on the other side of the lake where Jesus continues to heal many people. The crossing, and the turbulence of the lake not only call upon Jesus to demonstrate the strength of his love for the disciples (and for all who are afraid and feeling lost). The calming of the storm and the landing on the other side of the lake is also a way of marking a new experience in the life of Christ and his followers as Jesus expounds on some of the customs of the Pharisees, and as he goes among non-Israelites, among Gentiles who are usually excluded from Israelite society and its blessings.

Starting in verse ten, we hear Jesus responding to a criticism. A delegation of Pharisees and scribes have come all the way from Jerusalem to ask Jesus why he and his disciples do not follow their tradition of washing their hands before eating.

This was an important activity to the Pharisees. And their concern, while it was not in the Law, neither was it arbitrary. Rather, to the Pharisees, it was a point of honor, a scrupulous adherence to convention and principal that you took the time to perform as a way of praising God. To dispense with this practice was an affront to them and their authority to lead the people.

However, as I said: washing hands before meals was not proscribed in kosher Law for all people. It was only proscribed for the priests. The Pharisees had adopted this custom for themselves and over time they had come to proscribe it for all the people.

Matthew shows us a Jesus who uses the Pharisee’s overemphasis on this point of *their* custom to bring forth something bigger and more pressing. What Jesus wants to get to the heart of is how customs and manners can sometimes hinder us from caring for one another. Sometimes we become so locked into the way people have always interacted with one another that we miss an opportunity to draw close to each other.

What we see in this portrait of Jesus is one who literally lifts up and blesses those who are able to care about what is in their heart, rather than what is only customary. *“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,* [says Jesus] *and this is what defiles.”* [v. 19-20]

Then, in the very next story, Jesus demonstrates how far literal adherence to anything—even his own understanding of his mission—could have kept even him from showing the love and the power of God’s love to the world…and he acknowledges that even he cannot and *will* not prevent the love of God from going out to all who are made in the image of God.

I have preached on this passage many times and each time I have been stymied by Jesus’ words to this poor woman who was desperate for her daughter’s sake. What Matthew shows us here is a person most people would have been able to identify with: a desperate parent with a sick child.

So desperate is this woman, that on hearing how this Israelite had healed others, had fed thousands, had walked on the water and calmed storms—after hearing all of this, she must have felt tremendous relief that this very Jesus was now in her neighborhood.

She knows she is not one of his people, but her need is great and so she goes and finds him. She humbles herself before him…she is *not* disappointed. The love she feels for her daughter is matched by the love of God in Jesus.

Jesus shows his disciples what it means to live as someone in touch with a law that is higher than the laws, traditions and conventions of human society. No self-respecting and self-righteous person but Jesus would have had anything to do with this woman but Jesus. He saw her and healed her daughter.

What I saw, this time, as I read and studied, and spoke with the Bible Study group on Wednesday evening. He was not a cold, disinterested Jesus. This time I saw a Jesus who loved and served. I saw a Jesus who stopped in the midst of serving his own needs to serve others by showing them the power and the expansive reach of God’s love.

God’s love was not going to be stopped because there *appeared* to be too little to share. It would not be stopped because those in need were too far away. With Jesus, no one could sink too far beneath the waves of life that he could not grasp their hand and pull them back to safety.

The love of God would not even be stopped, or be put off, because the people in need were somehow different than him and his people. We are all God’s people. What Matthew shows us in these two stories is that we are all seen and cared for by God. God’s love excludes no one.

As for us: our world has undergone many changes in all of our lifetimes. For many of us, the changes may seem rapid, or arbitrary, or uncomfortable. You hear many people railing against something called “woke-ness” and how to include people of different sexual orientations if the life of the community becomes “woke.”

To go deep into an understanding of how the intersection of race and history continue to impact current relationships, economic status, and opportunity is considered by some to be “woke-ness,” and therefore must be denigrated if not completely ignored.

Even the rights of women, which most of us had hoped had been settled, have come under fire and in the area of privacy and total autonomy over our bodies, abolished.

What are we to do about this?

My hope is that we will remember these stories; remember how the love of God was not paused or stopped with Jesus. Instead, people were saved, lives were literally saved.

My hope is that we will ask ourselves who is in need of the love of God that can change everything for good; can open a door that has been closed; can save a life that was on the verge of being lost.

My hope is that we will embrace, rather than turn away, from the love of God, and bravely let that love take us into new paths…into new life.

I would like to bring the sermon to a close with prayer. Please pray with me:

*Here in this time of worship, O Lord, we offer ourselves fully to you.*

*May your will be our guide.*

*May your love be the pattern of our life.*

*May your way be our hope.*

*May your path be our help.*

*Fill us, Lord, here and now, with a deep sense of your presence and a strong sense of your empowering Spirit. Take this time of prayer to renew our faith and replenish our hearts. Rebirth our spirits so that we may live with hope and confidence this day and every day, in the name of Jesus. Amen.*